

Nation: Labor Turmoil: Truce and New Threats

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As postal employees returned to work last week and got the mail moving, the nation had a right to feel relieved; total chaos had been narrowly averted, at least temporarily. But any sense of relaxation is premature. American labor is in a state of turmoil, and the threat of other potentially crippling strikes hangs over the country. No sooner had the postal strike ended than another group of federal employees, the nation's professional air-traffic controllers, began delaying hundreds of flights daily and causing the cancellation of others by a planned "sick-out." The nation's railroads face a shutdown if no action is taken on union demands by April 11. Printers and mailers have voted to strike New York City newspapers if their requests are not met. Some 425,000 of the country's Teamsters have rejected a trucking-industry offer and are set to walk off their jobs when their contract expires this week.

With inflation ravaging the pocketbooks of virtually all Americans, it is hardly surprising that so many unions are seeking more money and backing up their demands with strike threats. What is surprising, however, is the new militance of federal employees, who are forbidden by law to strike. Public employees are now refusing to be bound by the legal strictures that previously maintained discipline. And public officials have been slow to catch up with that new, crucial reality.

Their slowness proved to be costly in the case of the mail strike. When more than 200,000 of the Post Office's 740,000 employees illegally left their jobs, the Government's authority was placed in question and the well-being of business, institutions and individuals in jeopardy. Only a belated recognition of the dangers by workers and the Government enabled the country to avoid what might have been a disaster.

In their eagerness to ward off just such a disaster, both sides made concessions. The Government, which had earlier pledged not to negotiate until the strike ended, seized on a developing back-to-work trend as an excuse to open talks with union leaders. The mailmen, who had vowed to stay out until Congress took action on their wage demands, settled for the opening of serious talks with Administration officials—though the Executive Branch by itself has no authority to set pay scales.

Trial by Crisis. The strike was the result of long-term Government neglect. President Nixon himself acknowledged that Post Office employees were unjustly treated when he first entered Government 23 years ago and that little had been done to improve their lot. That failure gave the Nixon Administration its first real trial by crisis, and the President handled it with considerable skill. His options were few. Seeking to avoid either showing weakness or risking exacerbating the situation by overreaction, Nixon chose a cautious

middle course. Having threatened to take action if the strike was not ended by the first of last week, he watched over the weekend as one union local after another joined the walkout. Then, convinced that the walkout was spreading, he moved decisively. After briefing congressional leaders on his plans, he went on television to announce that he was sending in troops to move the mail. The issue, Nixon told the nation, was nothing less than "the survival of a Government based upon law."

Nixon chose his target carefully. Determined to use as little force as possible, he concentrated his efforts on New York, where the stoppage had begun and where its impact was greatest; he said that he would use troops in other cities only if workers failed to return to their jobs. Within hours of the President's announcement, about 2,600 regular Army, Navy and Air Force personnel arrived at New York's main post office from nearby bases to begin sorting mail. More than 23,000 reservists and National Guardsmen, called to active duty by presidential proclamation, began arriving in the city the following morning. Because of administrative snafus and the fact that some weekend warriors evaded the summons, only about 16,000 were actually used.

Old Army Game. Nixon's vinegar-and-honey approach, which combined the troop call-up and carefully applied judicial pressure with a sincere willingness to negotiate, broke the back of the strike. Though the troops did little to reduce the Post Office backlog, the presence of uniformed (but unarmed) soldiers and military vehicles on the streets of New York convinced the nation and the strikers that the President meant business. To a great extent, the use of servicemen was psychological.

The troopers got mixed reviews as postal workers. While some shouldered mail sacks and delivered the contents to Wall Street firms, a publisher of pornographic books, other businesses and institutions, many played the old Army game of goldbricking and, seizing empty mail sacks, disappeared for the day. Still others, working in post offices and resentful of the disruption in their lives, deliberately threw letters into wrong pigeonholes and switched labels on boxes of outgoing mail.

Nonetheless, the show of force had the desired effect. Across the country, locals that had not yet joined the strike voted to remain on the job; those that had walked out voted to return to work. Cleveland and Detroit capitulated; Chicago surrendered. Faced with an anti-strike injunction, Henry Zych, 56, president of the Chicago branch of the National Association of Letter Carriers, donned his blue-gray mailman's uniform for the first time in nine years and exhorted his men to return to work. Said Zych: "Washington has heard us. We have made our point."

By Wednesday, only New York remained on strike, isolated from the rest of the country and under increasing pressure to end its resistance. Administration officials had already begun meeting with union leaders in Washington to hammer out a pay-raise agreement. New York City Postmaster John Strachan tried to win over the strikers with an offer of amnesty; other postal officials undermined unionists' confidence with overoptimistic reports of the troops' effectiveness in handling the mail. The federal court joined the siege. U.S. District Judge Frederick Bryan found Gustave Johnson, president of New

York's Branch 36, N.A.L.C., in contempt of an earlier court order forbidding the strike, and gave him until 5 p.m. Wednesday to get his men back to work or face fines that could bankrupt both him and the union. The judge set Johnson's fine at \$500 a day, the union's at \$10,000 for the first day, and he stipulated that the union's fines would increase as the strike continued.

With a final, face-saving gesture, Johnson gave in. He called a news conference to say that he had been assured the Administration was considering a pay-raise package for immediate submission to Congress. Then he ordered his local's 6,500 members, whose walkout had sparked the nationwide strike, to return to work. Within an hour, they began to comply. So did the 26,000 members of the Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union.

Congressman on Call. Johnson talked in terms of a 12% increase, with improvements in such fringe benefits as health insurance. At present, a clerk or carrier who enters postal service at \$6,176 a year must wait 21 years to be eligible for the maximum of \$8,442. At week's end the Administration formally agreed that the workers deserve—and will get—a pay increase. In early negotiations, the Administration first offered only a 6% increase; this was rejected by union negotiators. The Government team hinted that it would offer more if the unions would accept Nixon's plan for postal reform. This, too, was rejected and both sides agreed to concentrate first on the sole issue of the amount of pay. The unions then raised their demand to a 20% increase.

Though Congress has not committed itself to supporting the Administration's proposals, it was anticipating an agreement. After breakfasting with the President, two members of a House-Senate conference committee on pay-raise legislation—Senators Gale McGee and Hiram Fong—consented to delay any congressional action until they saw the Administration proposal. They were determined to add a few of their own conditions to a pay package. They agreed that any bill to raise postal pay must include not only some retroactivity but also raises for other federal employees before the end of the calendar year.

Such action can hardly come too soon. Though union leaders acknowledge that the strike was illegal, they also feel that it was justified. Said the N.A.L.C.'s Johnson: "We had shown our good faith in Congress by waiting and waiting and waiting, and we finally lost all faith and took this action. The fact that the strike spread so rapidly shows that the needs of New York are the needs of the entire country." There seemed to be no question that the postmen would get the largest raise in their history; the only question was how much.

Though doubtless necessary to avert a crisis, the talks provide an encouraging example for other restless federal employees. They are at least partially responsible for the action by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization's massive "sick out," which kept about 4,000 of the Federal Aviation Administration's 16,000 controllers off their jobs, delaying departing aircraft for more than four hours. At its peak, though, the protest forced cancellation of only about 200 of the airlines' 20,700 scheduled flights. Caused as much by union politics as by complaints about pay and working hours (see box), that

disruption may continue until the Federal Government grants some of the controllers' demands.

There are important differences between the case of the postal workers and that of the air controllers. Nonetheless, the two problems underscore a broad dilemma for the Government. Because it failed to act on its employees' grievances until too late, the Government has been forced to reward an illegal walkout by granting at least some of the strikers' demands. New policies are clearly required to prevent such binds in the future. A policy of pre-emptive concession is needed first—a system sufficiently alert to spot legitimate complaints early and flexible enough to satisfy them before the atmosphere becomes desperate. If this existed, not only would the nation's central nervous system be spared dangerous strain but the cost would probably be less.